JUSTIN (PRIESTMONK)

Life in the Monastic Community: the Living Tradition of the Desert Fathers

When we think of the Desert Fathers, we recall the great Antony, Pachomios, Sisoes, the Fathers of Wadi Natrun. All of these are radiant spiritual luminaries, and monks of every age have stood in their shadow. Sinai remained more isolated, more sparsely settled, but it can be pointed out that Sinai need yield to none, in antiquity, or for excellence of monastic achievements[1].

The monk Ammonios of Kanopos was a pilgrim to Sinai, and an eyewitness to an invasion of the Blemmyes in which forty monks of Sinai and forty monks of Rhaitho were martyred. He was present with Doulos, the Abbot of Sinai, when a monk named Psoes came, informing him of the devastation of Rhaitho, and asking to be allowed to live at Mount Sinai. He had lived at Rhaitho for twenty years. 'But there are others who have dwelt here for forty years, and for fifty, and for sixty, and for seventy years, who have dwelt in the same place.'

He told them, 'A certain Moses, having adopted the discipline of monasticism from his youth, practised monasticism for seventy-three years in that mountain from which springs of water issued.' 'And this saint, from the time that he took the habit of Christ, ate no flesh, but he ate dates only.' 'The food of that saint was a few dates, and water only. And he never tasted wine. And his dress was of compressed palm fibre. And he loved silence more than all men.' From the many miracles that God wrought through him, all the inhabitants of Pharan had come to believe in the Holy Trinity, and received holy Baptism[2].

Lest a diet of dates sound exotic, we recall here the words of Charles Doughty, who travelled in Arabia in 1877–8, and witnessed what it was to subsist on such a diet.

> The Arabians inhabit a land of dearth and hunger, and there is no worse food than the date, which they must eat in their few irrigated valleys. This fruit is overheating and inwardly fretting under a sultry climate: too much of cloying sweet, not ministering enough of brawn and bone; and therefore all the date-eaters are of a certain wearish visage. … Where the date is eaten alone, as they themselves say, human nature decays, and they drink a lukewarm ground-water, which is seldom wholesome in these parts of the world[3].

I was in Rhaitho this past June for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. The temperature registered 118F/47,7C degrees. A hot and searing breeze blew from across the Red Sea. It was yet another small insight into the heroism of the monks who lived there in centuries gone by.

Ammonios also tells about one Joseph from Eilath, who had a cell at Rhaitho two miles from the water. One of the brethren came to see him, and knocked on the door to his cell. Receiving no answer, he looked in and saw that Joseph had become a flame of fire from his head to his feet, and he continued wrapt in this vision for the space of five hours. Coming to himself, he opened the door and cured the thoughts of that brother, who returned to his own cell with his soul at peace. But understanding that he had been seen, Joseph departed from that place.

---

1 See now U. DAHARI, Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: the Archaeological Remains (*Israel Antiquities Authority, Reports* 9). Jerusalem 2000.

2 A. SMITH LEWIS, The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert and the Story of Eulogius, from a Palestinian Syriac and Arabic Palimpsest (*Horae Semiticae no. IX*). Cambridge 1912, 4–5. See also C. MÜLLER-KESSLER – M. SOKOLOFF, The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert, Eulogius the Stone-Cutter, and Anastasia, in: A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic, III. Groningen 1996, 21–8.

3 C. M. DOUGHTY, Travels in Arabia Deserta, I. New York 1936, 190.

After the space of six years, he returned again to his disciple, informing him that this day was the last of his sojourn in the world. He spoke much with his disciple for the benefit of his soul.

> And in that hour the old man stretched out his hands to heaven, and prayed, and slept in peace. And our brother his disciple ran immediately and assembled the holy fathers. And we took branches of palm-trees, and we went and with songs and with psalms we brought him into the church. And his face was shining like a light. And we kept a vigil over him all the night. And we laid him with the saints who slept there in the place. And these holy fathers were perfect and excellent in their discipline, and in prayer, and in their own polity[4].

The events described by Ammonios allow us to date his account to the year 373[5]. Thus when he describes elders who have dwelt there as monks for sixty, for seventy, and more years, we understand that there was already an established monasticism at Sinai and Rhaitho in the third century, when persecutions were still raging against the Christians, when the great Antony was as yet living in the ruined fort, for he began to live there in 285, and lived there for twenty years. 'To the end of this sojourn belongs the first great wave of monastic settlement in the desert.'[6] Even then there dwelt ascetics at Sinai and Rhaitho who were established in virtue, who had attained to the pinnacles of prayer and spiritual graces.

Why did men depart into the desert to take up such a way of life? This must be seen first as a fulfilment of the commands of the Gospel. 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven' (Matthew xix 21). 'Take therefore no thought for the morrow' (Matthew vi 34). These were the words that inspired Saint Antony to leave the world and begin his spiritual ascent[7].

But this must be seen also as a desire to follow the example of Christ Himself, Who 'humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross' (Phil. ii 8).

Obedience is one of the hallmarks of monasticism. Saint John Klimax has written much on obedience, the fourth step in his immortal *Ladder*. 'Obedience is the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility.' 'Obedience is an abandonment of discernment in a wealth of discernment.'[8] This also must be seen as undertaken in likeness to Christ, Who was Himself obedient to the Father.

> Our Lord's sayings too to His brethren are given to us in abundance; of His words to His Eternal Father but a few occasional specimens are recorded in Holy Writ. A few expressions occur at different periods of His ministry, and one remarkable chapter (St John xvii) which declares its completion. These all reveal the same truth respecting Our Lord's relation to the Father, that its single characteristic was Obedience. Thus did the Pattern Man render exactly that service, in which all His brethren had been wanting. … Now, Our Lord declares the fulfilment of His Father's will to have been the very purpose of His being: 'I have glorified Thee on the earth; I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do.' Or again: 'What shall I say? Father save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour.' And once more, even in His hour of agony did He exclaim: 'Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done.' … The two wills which dwelt within Him moved together in perfect and unalterable harmony. What the Divine will prescribed, the human will completely responded to: 'For I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.' …
>
> The life of the Pattern Man, then, may be said to have been a continual setting forth of that duty of Obedience, which His brethren, the children of Adam, had failed to render. … Yet there remained one thing still greater; for all mortal pangs are gathered together in that last and most fearful one, the tearing asunder of soul and body in death. Now, from this trial also Our Lord did not shrink. He was 'obedient unto death'. And in this part of His course lie those especial circumstances, which are declared in Holy Scripture to be the causes of man's redemption. For though He is said in general to be the 'last Adam', the 'second

4 Smith Lewis, The Forty Martyrs of Sinai, 7; Müller-Kessler – Sokoloff, The Forty Martyrs of Sinai 30–6.
5 H. Skrobucha, Sinai. London 1966, 20–7.
6 A. Robertson, Life of Saint Antony = A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series, IV. Peabody, MA. 1995, 190.
7 Robertson, Life of Saint Antony 196.
8 Saint John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, trans. by Archimandrite L. Moore. Boston 1978, 21.

Man', yet it is with His Death and Passion that His sacrifice for sin is expressly connected. For 'we have redemption through His blood', says the Apostle twice over, 'the forgiveness of sins'. He has 'made peace through the blood of His cross', and He came 'to give His life a ransom for many'[9].

This understanding of the Divine and human wills in Christ is to be found in the writings of Saint Maximos the Confessor. As Andrew Louth has observed:

> There are two natural wills, for the Incarnation is itself the expression of the divine will, that is common to the Persons of the Trinity, who are consubstantial one with another, and entails the assumption of human nature including the natural human will which is 'the power that longs for what is natural'. But there are not two 'gnomic' wills: there is not really any 'gnomic' will at all, for the process of formulating an intention (*gnômê*) as a necessary stage in coming to a decision and acting on it is not part of the 'mode of existence' of a divine Person at all, who is not to be thought of as deprived of knowledge of the good. What happens in the Incarnation is that 'the Incarnate Word possesses as a human being the natural disposition to will, and this is moved and shaped by the divine will'[10].

Submission to the will of God. Here we have one signal virtue. To take it up is to be conformed to Christ. But how is this to be accomplished? In answer to this we must look to the full spectrum of the experience and accomplishments of the Desert Fathers. But this understanding of obedience can provide an important insight into that inheritance. Striving earnestly to fulfil the Gospel, the Desert Fathers mapped out the terrain of the spiritual life, and that map has remained the same to this day.

They were very strenuous, afflicting themselves with confinement, hunger, thirst, deprivation of sleep, setting aside their own will in all things in their longing to be conformed to the Divine will. They were earnest about the Faith, for they understood that to be in heresy is to be separated from God[11]. But they also understood the disquietude that results from contentions about dogma. 'Flee from discussions of dogma as from an unruly lion; and never embark upon them yourself, either with those raised in the Church, or with strangers.'[12]

Yet such austerities and such zeal gave birth to gentleness, sensitivity, earnest care to avoid giving any offence. 'It is better for things of the body to perish with the body than for something pertaining to the soul to be hurt.'[13] Nor did they presume, even after a lifetime of labours, that they had become approved of God, but they preserved a sublime humility to the very end. This may be seen as the seal upon all their labours.

> The abbot Agatho said, 'A monk ought not to have his conscience able to accuse him in aught whatsoever.' Now when the aforesaid abbot Agatho was dying, he remained for three days motionless, holding his eyes open. And the brethren shook him, saying, 'Father, where art thou?' And he answered, 'I stand in sight of the divine Judgement.' And they said, 'Art thou afraid?' And he said, 'Here I have toiled with what strength I had to keep the commandments of God: but I am a man, and I know not whether my works have been pleasing in His sight.' The brethren say to him, 'And hast thou no confidence that thy works are according to God?' And the old man said, 'I do not presume, until I have come before God: for the judgements of God are other than the judgements of men.' And when they would have questioned him for further speech, he said to them, 'Show me your love and speak not to me, for I am busy.' And this said, straightway with joy he sent forth his spirit. For they saw him gathering his spirit together, as one who greets his dear friends. He had great guard in all things and used to say, that without watchfulness a man may climb to no virtue[14].

---

[9] R. I. Wilberforce, The Doctrine of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in its Relation to Mankind and to the Church. London 1849, 222–5.
[10] A. Louth, Maximus the Confessor. London 1996, 61.
[11] The Wit and Wisdom of the Christian Fathers of Egypt, trans. by E. A. Wallis Budge. London 1934, 51–2.
[12] The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian, trans. by D. Miller. Boston 1984, 95.
[13] The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian 95.
[14] The Desert Fathers, trans. H. Waddell. London 1936, 151–2.

But what of our own time? We read the following words with dismay,

> Once the abbot Arsenios came to a certain place and there was a bed of reeds, and the reeds were shaken by the wind. And the old man said to the brethren, 'What is this rustling?' And they said, 'It is the reeds.' The old man said to them, 'Verily, if a man sits in quiet and hears the voice of a bird, he hath not the same quiet in his heart: how much more shall it be with you, that hear the sound of these reeds?[15]

Is there a monk today who passes his time in such silence that the voice of a bird robs his heart of quiet? There are times at Sinai, especially at night, when not a sound is to be heard. And there are yet remote cells where one can experience something of the profound silence enjoyed by the Fathers of old. But in general things are very different today, and that not just at Saint Catherine's. After a drive of some six hours through the desert, and a flight of about half that time, a monk from Sinai finds himself in England. More distressingly, by the reverse, anyone from England can find himself at Sinai. And certainly many do: over one thousand every day, from all over the world, during the winter months especially, each one in quest of the silence and spirituality for which Sinai is renowned.

But if much has changed at Saint Catherine's in the last fifty years, much remains as it has always been. Rising at four o'clock in the morning, walking through the stillness of the desert night, entering the great sixth century basilica, lit at that time by only a few lamps and candles: these are moments that have remained intact from centuries gone by. The daily cycle of services, times of activity, of quiet – the context remains exactly as it has been.

A monastery may be a place of great beauty, with a venerable and celebrated spiritual heritage. But above all it must be a place where spirits stand already before the Judgement Seat of Christ, where hopes have already come to rest in that promised Kingdom which is to come.

The tradition of the Desert Fathers does continue. There is no sorrow that is not comforted on reading of their deeds. There is no pride but that it is humbled on recalling their accomplishments.

To live at Sinai is a continuous inspiration. It is written of Saint John Klimax, 'He took up the monastic yoke at Mount Sinai, and, I think, by the visible nature of the place itself, he was impelled and guided towards the invisible God.'[16] And the places of the martyrs' contest are forever hallowed, as we chant in the words of the hymn,

> Blessed is the earth that was enriched by your blood, prizewinners of the Lord, and holy are the tabernacles that received your bodies; for in the stadium ye triumphed o'er the foe, and ye proclaimed Christ with boldness. Entreat Him, in that He is good, and pray that our souls be saved[17].

We lament that Sinai is not as remote as it once was. But it may be that the world has grown smaller, and remote deserts and monasteries more accessible, in the dispensation of God, when the ancient spirituality preserved in such sanctuaries is now so needed in the world at large.

And what of the future? If there are admonitions in the Scriptures about the last times, such are also to be found among the words of the God-inspired Fathers of the desert.

> A certain Egyptian father once went into ecstasy and became a witness of a spiritual vision. He saw three monks standing on the sea-shore. From the other shore he heard a voice: 'Receive wings and come to Me.' After the voice, two of the monks received fiery wings and flew across to the other shore. The third one remained where he was. He began to weep and wail. At last wings were given to him too, but not fiery ones – they were so weak that he flew across the sea only with great difficulty and trouble, often becoming so feeble that he sank into the sea. The first two monks represented the monasticism of early times, while the third represented the monasticism of the last times, poor in numbers and in accomplishments[18].

---

[15] The Desert Fathers 92.

[16] The Ladder of Divine Ascent, xxxiv.

[17] The Octoechos, Martyricon after the Second Reading of the Psalter in Matins for Wednesdays in Second Tone (Author's translation).

[18] I. Brianchaninov, The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism. Jordanville, NY 1983, 115. See also B. Ward, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection. London 1981, 88.

Abba John the Short quoted this logion, with the words that the last state was that of his own time. He lived in the third generation after Saint Antony, and witnessed the devastation of Scete that took place in the early fifth century[19]. Monks of every age since then have felt that their times were the times of feebleness in comparison to the heroism and accomplishments of the Fathers of old. And that is no less true of our own days.

This saying by Abba Ischyrion, a contemporary of Abba John the Short, is another:

> The holy Fathers prophesied concerning the last generation. They said, 'What have we accomplished?' And one of them, the great Abba Ischyrion, answering said, 'We have fulfilled the commandments of God.' And they answering said, 'And those after us, what will they fulfil?' And he said, 'They will come to the half of what we have accomplished.' And they said, 'And those after them, what will they fulfil?' He said, 'The men of that generation will not have any accomplishment whatsoever, but temptation will come upon them; and those who are found trustworthy at that time, shall be found greater than both us and our Fathers[20].

There is a danger in such sayings. A monk can make excuse for much with the words, 'What can we do? These are the last times.' The pull to feebleness may be abetted by precisely those sayings that were intended as a warning. We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 'Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever' (Hebrews xiii 8). The way of spiritual ascent, of sanctification, remains the same today as it was for the Fathers of old.

But what do we understand of these warnings of a monasticism 'poor in numbers and in accomplishments', or 'bereft of any accomplishment whatsoever'? The first step of the *Ladder* is renunciation of the world. There are many ways in which this separation is slowly and even imperceptibly undermined. This may be with the best of intentions. It may be due to outward influences – ecclesiastical, spiritual, intellectual. It may also be an accommodation to the world on the part of monastics themselves. As renunciation of the world is the first step of the *Ladder,* so does this remain the bulwark of monastic life.

'Those who are found trustworthy at that time'. The imagery is that of metal tried by fire to essay its fineness. Such will be the trial, and such the feebleness of the spiritual life, that the little done in that day will be the equal of the accomplishments surpassing the bounds of human nature which were wrought of old. Such admonitions must be considered together with others found in Scripture: 'When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?' (Luke xviii 8). As conformity to Christ was seen as the first goal of the monastic life, so does this remain its final arbiter.

We conclude with two observations. This conference is dedicated to 'Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium'. Many of the objects that survive from Byzantine times are religious. They must be understood in their proper context, and that is the theology of the Incarnation and the economy of our salvation. Nor is this a context that has been lost. It is the experience in general of every Orthodox church. It is the inheritance in particular of those ecclesiastical institutions that trace a continuous tradition from Byzantine times.

And lastly, in this conference, a comparison between the state of the medical arts then and now must have come to mind on many occasions. Were the Byzantines ahead of their times? Did their concepts include aspects that are not considered as a whole today? Certainly there are many ways in which technology has changed since then.

But human nature does not change. The admonitions of the Desert Fathers are still penetrating, acute, poignant. And today, how many still experience sickness and suffering that are beyond alleviation. How many times is modern technology unavailing. Inner strengths, spiritual strengths, must yet be found. The ascetic struggles voluntarily undertaken by the Desert Fathers, their achievements, their triumphs, their transcendence of all things pertaining to this world, their witness to the abiding presence of God, assume a timeless significance.

---

[19] D. J. Chitty, The Desert a City. Crestwood, NY. 1995, 66–8.

[20] *PG* 65, 241D, 244A (Author's translation). See The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection 111; also Brianchaninov, The Arena 115.